



Title	STILL TRYING TO FIND THEIR OLACE
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Citation	国際公共政策研究. 2005, 9(2), p. 349-352
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://hdl.handle.net/11094/6201
rights	
Note	

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Takeyuki Tsuda (2003) *Strangers in the Ethnic Homeland: Japanese Brazilian Return Migration in Transnational Perspective*. New York: Columbia University Press, 431 pp.
Hardback 0-231-12838-X, \$65 and Paperback 0-231-12839-8, \$27.50.

Verònica Calafell Callejo*

Takeyuki Tsuda's *Strangers in the Ethnic Homeland: Japanese Brazilian Return Migration in Transnational Perspective* constitutes a significant contribution to the field of transnational migration in the form of a thoroughly-researched, comprehensive account of a relatively recent phenomenon of return migration: that of Japanese Brazilians to their so-called homeland, Japan.

The book analyzes the impact of migration on the minority status, ethnic identity and adaptation of the Japanese Brazilians within the context of migrant nationalism, transnational communities, and globalization. Tsuda's work is based on the rather accepted theory that the physically displaced are more likely to reconceptualize their ethnic status and identity. His greatest achievement, though, is building on that assumption as he moves on to analyze the effects of transnational migration not only on migrants themselves, but also on the host societies they enter and start to be part of, often in increasing numbers and for a number of years, maybe a lifetime.

Japanese emigration to Brazil began early in the 20th century and continued well into the 1960s. At the beginning, those who went were mostly farmers suffering difficult conditions in rural Japan who saw a new chance to make a living in the expanding, labor deficient coffee plantations of Brazil. After WWII,

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another wave of Japanese immigrants arrived seeking a gateway to a new life far from a devastated homeland. Currently, Brazil hosts the largest community of Japanese descendants outside Japan, up to approximately 1,300,000 people, composed of still some *issei* (1st generation), *nissei* (2nd generation), *sansei* (3rd generation) and *yonsei* (4th generation) migrants.

In the late 1980s, some of these Japanese Brazilians (or *nikkeijin*, as they are generally referred to) began return migrating to Japan due to an amalgam of factors, among which were a severe Brazilian economic crisis and a shortage of unskilled labor in Japan. This was further encouraged by the revision in 1990 of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act (*Shutsunyū koku kanri oyobi nanmin nintei hō*) (hereafter, Immigration Act) that enabled people of Japanese descent up to *yonsei* to enter Japan legally despite not being qualified to enrol in skilled labor. This mechanism attracted large numbers of Japanese Brazilians, some of them of educated and middle class background, to work as unskilled labor in Japanese factories, where they would earn from five to ten times the salary they had in Brazil. Japan was, in a way, a kind of Yen Town¹⁾ or Promised (home) Land.

The book is divided in three parts of two chapters each, a final conclusion and an excellent epilogue where the future of Japanese Brazilians is left open to discussion:

In the first part, *Minority Status*, the author analyzes the impact of the return migration of the Japanese Brazilians on their ethnic minority status. He divides it into a first chapter on the origin of Japanese migration to Brazil, and a second chapter on the sudden change of status of Japanese Brazilians, who move from a privileged position in their supposedly host country (Brazil), on to marginalization as low-social status migrants with a different culture in their so-called "homeland" (Japan).

The second part of the book, *Identity*, deals with issues of ethnic identity in the context of an emerging transnational migrant community. In its first chapter, Tsuda argues that the discrimination Japanese Brazilians experience

1) The term was used by the Japanese filmmaker Shunji Iwai in *Swallow Tail* (1995). The film portrays the lives of immigrants of Asian origin in Japan in a fiction Yen Town, where dreams of prosperity might come true.

in Japan makes them develop negative attitudes about the country and its people, thus reinforcing their identities as Brazilians. Ironically, the farther they are from Brazil, the more Brazilian they feel and act. The next chapter addresses the various networks that have developed between Japanese Brazilians in the two poles.

In the third part, *Adaptation*, Tsuda tackles behavioural consequences of migrant identities. From one extreme to the other, chapter 5 addresses adaptation from the point of view of resistance to assimilative Japanese cultural pressures by claiming cultural distinctiveness, while chapter 6 does so from the perspective of assimilation-minded individuals. These, the author affirms, might achieve better social acceptance from the Japanese, but would end up being despised by their Japanese Brazilian counterparts.

In the Conclusion, Tsuda contextualizes the encounter between the Japanese Brazilians and the Japanese within the worldwide ongoing process of globalization and observes the unintended effects that this encounter might have on Japan and its people, who would eventually grow increasingly conscious of their national homogeneity as they encounter the foreign.

Finally, the author grants us with a very valuable epilogue in which he raises more questions than he answers: in the light of Japanese Brazilians' growing tendency to settlement, will they resist assimilation or will they ever fade into the majority of the Japanese populace?

Through extensive research and fieldwork both in Brazil and Japan, Tsuda, currently associate director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies (CCIS) at the University of California at San Diego, makes a detailed portrait of the changing identities of Japanese Brazilians as they struggle to find where they belong. And he goes one step further, in a very frank account of his experience that ultimately bestows a touch of realism to the entire work: "I felt ethnically unanchored and decentered because of my inability to commit myself exclusively to either ethnic group and resolve my identity crisis." (p.31)

The work is mostly a description, indeed a rich one, "while remaining theoretically engaged" (p.49). With a very readable book full of personal anecdotes,

background when necessary and references to other authors' related work, Tsuda deserves high praise for his contribution to formal research but, even more, for the conscience-raising function it will surely play among the non-initiated to the field. The book is absorbent enough to attract a larger number of readers than its almost intimidating 500 pages might suggest.

One of the most interesting insights of the book is to be found in the reflection on the way the adaptation/assimilation/segregation of Japanese Brazilians in the fabrics of Japanese society will reshape the conception this society has of itself. By doing so, he shifts the focus of attention, traditionally placed on migrants, to those who deal with them. After all, what makes migrations interesting at a global scale is their role as a trigger for human evolution as they rise fundamental questions on "Who are they?", but most importantly, on "Who are we?" in the first place.

The descriptive character of the book, however, will probably leave some of the readers as hungry as a fine meal with no dessert. In a highly controversial issue such as migration and its effects on the identity of both migrants and host societies, the debate is constantly open, recommendations being made, discarded, implemented, then changed again. Whether it is because of the basic difference between anthropology and policy as distinct, yet complementary fields of study, or because of the moderation of the author, such recommendations are missing in the book. In their place, we are left with many questions ahead on the uncertain future of Japanese Brazilians in Japan.

After all, Japanese Brazilians' return migration to Japan is at a difficult age; 14 years after the Immigration Act was revised, the phenomenon is an adolescent struggling to define itself. The very author, when trying to determine how this relatively new community in Japan should be considered, wavers between "recent immigrants [and many still consider themselves to be sojourners]" (p.269) and "Japan's newest minority" (p.318), thus dangerously contradicting himself. Yet contradictions are an intrinsic part of humanities, inasmuch as humans are in continuous change by interacting with one another; finding where we are different, where we are the same: building identities based on ethnicity or culture and, ultimately, finding our place.